

terraqueous: An Epistle for Harriet Ann Jacobs

Michelle Lanier

Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University
michelle.lanier@duke.edu

Abstract

Harriet Ann Jacobs, born enslaved in North Carolina, was more than a fugitive freedom seeker. She was also known, loved, and held by Black South ecosystems of witness. Michelle Lanier archivally and ecologically roots the epistolary poem, 'terraqueous,' in an effort to shrink the distance between the commemorative echoes of Jacobs's story and the soils and waters that held her first breaths and acts of resistance.

Keywords

Ecosystems of witness, Black South, womanist cartography, AfroCarolina, Harriet Jacobs, marronage

Harriet Ann Jacobs,¹

You desired a hearth.²

A place of stone, likely granite, where you could heat with the radiance of fire to warm a room, light the face of love, cook the good food, like your grandmother, who hid you.

Grandmother Molly Horniblow³ held the secret of you tucked above her threshold.

You were in the air,⁴ magical as breast milk.

We have read of her abscondence during the Revolutionary Wars,⁵ that her boat was intercepted, that she was made to be a tavern girl, that she slipped her coins and commerce into folds and vessels in order to free her babies and herself.

Grandmother Molly's hearth was the one you remembered. We are now your hearths.

And of course there was The Garret, where she hid you.

It is the wound and womb we honor, the miracle of your making, of your autonomous self-taking.

You measured your wooden womb on high, 3 by 7 by 9, perhaps with the gimlet tool your uncle left in the wall (the one you used to carve out an umbilicus to the sky).

Perhaps you measured your hiding place with knitting needles or a crockery plate, or the lid of a newly scrubbed chamber pot.

I often consider the choreography of you opening the trap door and handing, in a covered vessel, the cloths of your menstruation into the hands of Molly, who must have lifted boiled and sunlight-dried rags above her head for you, in return.

She must also have lifted, above her head, figs upon warm bread.

¹ Harriet Ann Jacobs was a freedom seeker, abolitionist, journalist, American Civil War aid worker, keeper of boardinghouses, educator, suffragist, and memoirist born enslaved in Edenton, North Carolina. Renowned for hiding for nearly seven years in a miniscule garret, she wrote of her persecutions under and escape from slavery in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Jacobs escaped Edenton by boat (Jacobs 1861; Yellin 2008).

² The last line of Jacobs's *Incidents* references her desire for a hearthstone and reads "The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble. I wish it for my children's sake far more than for my own" (Jacobs 1861).

³ Harriet Jacobs's maternal grandmother, Molly Horniblow, appears under the pseudonym "Aunt Marthy," in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Horniblow was a formerly enslaved innkeeper acclaimed in Edenton for her baked goods and preserves, which she sold to purchase her own freedom and that of several kin. She also used these funds to pay the boatsmen who carried her granddaughter from Edenton. Horniblow's home contained the hiding place of Harriet Jacobs and the one-inch 'loophole' through which she viewed the world.

⁴ The space where Jacobs hid, constructed by her carpenter uncle, while she temporarily hid in a nearby swamp, measured "... only nine feet long, and seven feet wide. The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor" (Jacobs 1861).

⁵ Jacobs recalled in *Incidents*, of her grandmother Molly Horniblow's enslavement, "She was the daughter of a planter in South Carolina, who, at his death, left her mother and his three children free, with money to go to St. Augustine, where they had relatives. It was during the Revolutionary War; and they were captured on their passage, carried back, and sold to different purchasers. Such was the story my grandmother used to tell me; but I do not remember all the particulars" (Jacobs 1861).

Up there for 7 years, time traveling woman, could you have possibly seen us from the cervix of that womb, from your oculus in the sky, from your loophole?

You could not be held.

You went to war for us, with ink-carrying,⁶ seed-carrying,⁷ medicine-carrying, message-carrying hands, you waged war.

And then you sat down to set lace and cake-covered tables for your sisters once called bondswomen, when you weren't laboring for the day.

Aren't you here beating like a blazing hearthstone behind our breastplates?

AfroCarolina

AfroAtlantica

Intergalactic

Free as sound

Fierce as wind.

When the Jonkonnu⁸ returns to Edenton, the land of your birthing, and the Yeye Oya⁹ winds lift the ribbons, we promise you this:

There will be singing in your name;

There will be a summit of surmounting in the courthouse that day;

There will be an unfurling of all you touched, a litany for your hands.

There will be an invocation of what witnessed you (jessamine bloom,¹⁰ water moccasin, soils of ash and blood, cypress, scuppernong, biscuit bread, fig, painted bunting, green heron, tundra swan, dolphin, sycamore, the burial grounds of your mothers, and the wind-tides of Edenton).

There will be an unfurling of all that received your feet and light and the still-watching gaze of your mind's eye through the loophole of time.

There will be a contending, a beckoning, a drawing nigh.

The sister-daughters of your home soils have been beckoned *here* by the power of your call in the heart-work of Black women.

In your mouth and mind, space and time became liquid, your footfalls coordinates and compasses.

⁶ A writer, Jacobs would have dipped a pen in ink and prepared printing presses for periodicals, reports, funding requests, and personal correspondence.

⁷ Jacobs distributed seed to grow sustenance gardens as an aid worker during and just after the Civil War. Upon returning briefly to Edenton, her place of birth and enslavement, she showed women how to plant small plots to feed their newly-freed families and themselves (Yellin 2008).

⁸ Jonkonnu, spelled 'Johnkannaus' by Jacobs, is an African diaspora masking and revelry tradition involving coordinated dancing, singing, and lyrical social commentary (Jacobs 1861). The colorful attire of key revelers, as described by Jacobs, is reminiscent of the Yoruba Egungun masquerade ceremony.

⁹ Oya is an Orisha, or deity, of the Yoruba faith.

¹⁰ In a letter dated April 25, 1867, Harriet Jacobs wrote "I send ... some Jassamine blossoms ... they bear the fragrance of freedom" (Yellin 2008).

We are grateful for the waves of light, of sound and water, of Spirit.
 They permit us to speak with you, to hear from you, across the distances you traversed.
 The boats that carried you, carried us.
 The winds that carried you, carry us.
 Your Loophole, once dark, is now lit.
 Your hearthstones are here.

With Love,
 Michelle Lanier on behalf of The Carolina Wind-Tide Women, who have come

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